


Modernism

1915-1945

A low-angle photograph of the Statue of Liberty, showing her head with the crown and her right arm raised holding the torch. The background is a cloudy sky. The statue is green, and the torch is gold.

Welcome to The American Dream

Hot Dogs, Baseball, Jazz, and Money

Before the War

- Years preceding war are full of optimism
- Technology advances by leaps and bounds
 - 1890s: Radio
 - 1890s: Skyscrapers
 - 1895: Motion Pictures
 - 1902: Air Conditioner
 - 1903: Wright Brothers
 - 1908: Ford's Model T and Assembly Line
 - 1914: Liquid Fuel Rocket

During the War

- 1914: War breaks out in Europe
 - US remains neutral
- 1917: US enters War
 - Confident and optimistic
 - Realities of war soon set in
- 1918: War ends
 - Over 100,000 Americans killed

After the War

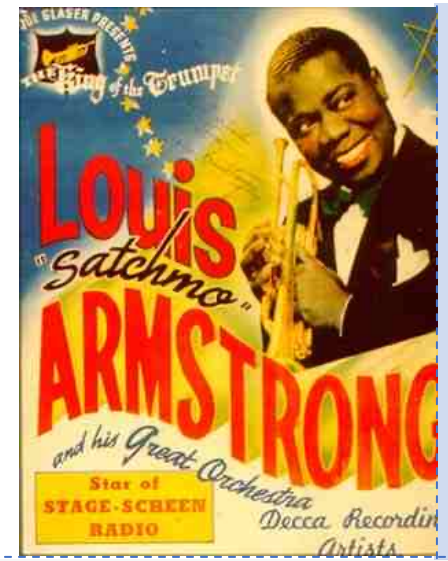
- Our sense of optimism falters
- Our sense of security vanishes
- Our sense of comfort is disturbed
- America suffers a crisis of identity
- The country goes through a process of “binging” and “purging,” as we struggle to define ourselves in a changing world
 - Celebrate or moderate?
 - Spend or save?
 - Relieved or lucky?
 - Return to old values or invent new “modern” ones?

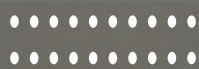
Social Scene

- Result: is a confusing mixture of:
 - prosperity and depression
 - liberation and repression
 - excitement and fear
- 1915-1930: The Great Migration
 - Over two dozen riots in 1919—the “Red Summer”
- 1919: Prohibition
- 1920: Women’s Suffrage
- 1920: A new “urban” nation
- 1929: St. Valentine’s Day Massacre
- 1933: Prohibition repealed

1920s America “Binges”

- Economic Boom
- Urbanization
- Vertical Cities
- Hollywoodland
- Fashion Fads
- Greenwich Village Artists
- Radio Arrives
- New Music: *Jazz*





1930s America “Purges”

- 1929: Stock Market Crash
- 1930: Drought
- 1934: Dust Bowl
- Great Depression



Literary Scene

- From this social rollercoaster
Modernism is born
- Two different forces shape literature
 - Recklessness and liberation of the
“Roaring” ’20s
 - Hopelessness and tragedy of the Great
Depression and ’30s
- No longer satisfied with “re-creating”
life (Realism), Modernists wish to create
a new literature for a new country



A New and Complicated World

- Modernists experiment with style and technique
- Experimentation brings tremendous diversity
- There is no clear and consistent set of features to box them in, and nothing is off limits
- However, they do share a common vision:
 - **To capture the essence of “modern” life, not only in the content of their work, but also in its form**



Modernist Tendencies: Complex and Obscure

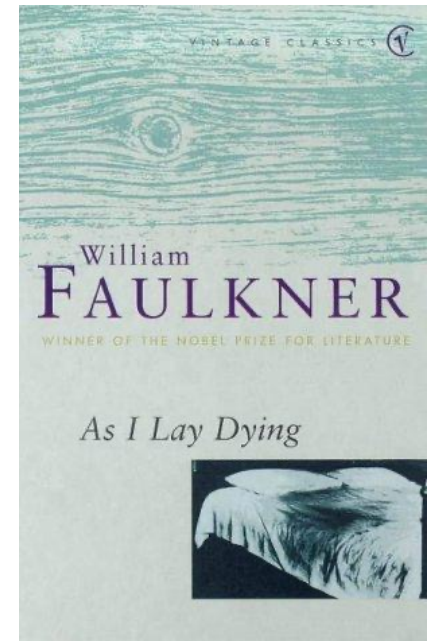
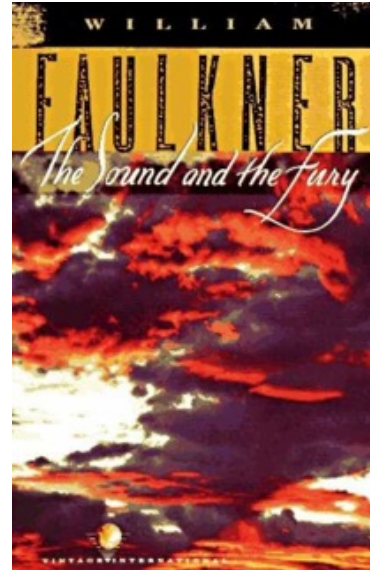
1. Themes are often implied
2. Characters are morally ambiguous
3. Conclusions are often open-ended
4. Traditional plot is often abandoned
 - **All this forces readers to come to their own interpretive understanding of a book**

Faulkner

A Lesson in Experimentation

Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep. —*The Sound and the Fury* (1929)

I am I and you are you and I know it and you dont know it and you could do so much for me if you just would and if you just would then I could tell you and then nobody would have to know it except you and me and Darl. —*As I Lay Dying* (1930)



Hemingway

A Lesson in Ambiguity

“Well, how did you like the bulls?” he asked.

“Good. They were nice bulls.”

“They’re all right” — Montoya shook his head —
“but they’re not so good.”

“What didn’t you like about them?”

“I don’t know. They just didn’t give me the
feeling that they were so good.”

“I know what you mean.”

“They’re all right.”

“Yes. They’re all right.”

“How did your friends like them?”

“Fine.”

“Good,” Montoya said.

I went upstairs. — *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

